" WASHTENAW IMPRESSIONS "

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MICHIGAN PRINTING TO 1850

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At the outset of this short disquisition on early printing in Michigan, I must acknowledge my deep indebtedness to those worthy scholars who have danced in these fields before I galumphed onto the scene. Particularly, tribute should be paid to the excellent work of the late Douglas McMurtrie, who exposed the myths devised by Farmer and his ilk. It is on Mr. McMurtrie's Early Printing in Michigan that most of today's statements must rest in large measure. The important Preliminary Check List of Michigan Imprints, 1796-1850 (and especially the fine introduction by our fellow townsman, Mr. B. A. Uhlendorf) has also been of inestimable value in rescuing me from my quandary.

I am a Michigander by choice and a resident of Washtenaw Co. by accident - the accident being the location of the University of Michigan. Until I arrived in this state, I knew little about it and I must confess that my knowledge of the history of the state is still faulty in several departments, so it was with a little pleasure that I took this opportunity to catch up on a few of the things I ought to know. I am sorry for your sakes that you have not a more competent speaker than I am for the history of printing in this state. Before I came to Ann Arbor, almost the only thing I knew about Michigan (aside from a few of its scenic wonders and its excelled-only-by-Wisconsin fish) was that Michigan was the last state to receive printing before the end of the eighteenth century.

It would surprise me very much to discover that anyone here tonight was not aware of that fact and likewise was not aware that the first printer was named John McCall and that he did his first printing in Detroit in 1796. The story of the introduction of printing to these parts ought to be well enough known here by this time, but for the sake of those people who are continually surprising me, let us review some of the facts as they are credited now. (After all, if I skipped over the earliest steps, there would be something missing in the picture -- rather like the cigarettes missing from our national picture at this time.)

As far as we are aware, there was no printing establishment in Detroit under the long French rule, although there has been loose talk of a northern Michigan French press under Father Jonois in the middle of the eighteenth century. I suppose we shall always hope that something may turn up someday and rock us on our mental heels and make those of us who can't own the rarity drool at our bibliographic mouths. But such a discovery seems to me highly unlikely.

The English who followed the French into Detroit and who took nominal control of the back country as well, were no better on the point of printing than the French -- in fact, there isn't even a suspicion that they printed anything here, although - as I shall explain later - the first printing press (which the owners didn't know how to put together, let alone operate) may have come into Detroit eleven years before the English left. When the Americans took over from the English in 1796, there were residents (I hope more than one) who believed that a well-run printing establishment was essential to the health of a growing community. This feeling was quite in tune with the times.

Wherever Americans went, as they streamed west from the Alleghanies, they carted with them, laboriously and at considerable expense, printing equipment, paper and ink with which to tell the world and themselves how wonderful they were and with which they could argue with one another and themselves interminably. Toward the end of the eighteenth century, the American people were readers and writers - a few of the latter good, most of them mediocre. They had voracious appetites for large quantities of printed matter and they gulped it down in ever-increasing reams, calling all the while for more and more. What so natural, then, as that they should take their printing plants with them as they moved out into the wilderness? At least, a sheet of freshly printed paper made for a feeling of solidity and permanence -- a sense it is difficult to imagine a rough cabin or a pine-bough lean-to might produce. Marshalk, the first printer of Mississippi (who visited Detroit and the Michigan area, by the way), was an army officer who carried a private press with him on his tours of duty and finally wound up as a working printer. Ohio and Kentucky and Tennessee sported printing presses which ground out large numbers of newspapers, laws and pamphlets. The writers had even developed a kind of literature -- a distinctive frontier journalese literature. When the Americans moved into Detroit, I suspect they must have been a little astonished to find that a community of two hundred houses did not have an active printing establishment. Smaller places often had more than one thriving printer.

We know very little of the life of John McCall, Detroit's first printer. Indeed, his existence was not known until fifteen years ago and for some time he was suspected of not having been a printer in Detroit at all. His first piece of work was printed in the year the Americans took over in Detroit. It was <u>An Act passed at the Fourth Congress of the United States of America</u>, and must have been on sale quite shortly after Anthony Wayne entered the city. It was "An Act to regulate trade and intercourse with the Indian tribes and preserve peace on the frontiers." Naturally, the act was of some importance to a frontier settlement such as Detroit was and it is understandable that Detroiters would need copies of this act under which they were now to carry on trade with the Indians. As a matter of fact, they wanted the book to such an extent, and used the copies so hard, that today only one copy of the book is known to be extant. It is a prized possession of the Burton Historical Collections of the Detroit Public Library. If any of you find a copy in your garret, please let me know - I shall be happy to take it off your hands.

The McCall press probably didn't last very long. Its output (aside from the book mentioned earlier) consisted of legal forms, bill-heads, probably broadsides, etc. On these latter pieces McCall's name does not appear and were it not for the book he printed the name of Detroit's first printer might be unknown today. His existence was suspected for some time before manuscript records in the account-books of James May, an early Detroit merchant, were discovered in the Burton Historical Collections. These manuscript entries prove, as Mr. McMurtrie pointed out, that there was a John McCall in Detroit at the right time and that he was a printer, for he is so named. Otherwise it might be thought that the first Detroit book was actually printed in Philadelphia, where the laws had been passed.

There existed at one time -- according to Silas Farmer -- records to prove that the materials of a printing press were imported to Detroit by William and Alexander Macomb in 1785. Again according to Farmer, the Macombs didn't know how to set the press up -- the instructions were not included in the package (sounds like a complicated pre-war child's toy). It is quite possible that the press used by McCall is the press supposedly mentioned in the now-lost correspondence of the Macombs -- certainly no records have been located of the importation of a printing press by McCall or by any other resident of Detroit about 1796. At any rate, a press was in operation in Detroit from 1796 until 1805, when it seems to have been destroyed by the fire which swept over the city in that latter year. We know that the press was operated through those years (although there is nothing to prove that McCall was the only printer during that time -- he may have trained someone else and then moved on -- printers have always been a restless group). We know the press was operating because of the existence of certain legal forms which are partly printed and merely filled in by hand. They were used through 1805 and after that year dwindle away as though the supply were being used up and are replaced by the same forms in manuscript. Apparently the press was lost in the fire, but some of the forms were saved.

From 1798 on, there lived in Detroit a very remarkable person who was, to a large extent, responsible for what excellences the town could then claim. He was Father Gabriel Richard, a French Sulpician priest, and a man to whom Detroit and Michigan and the University all owe a very great debt. Father Richard was one of those amazing men to whom nothing seems to have been impossible of achievement -- he is akin to the versatile geniuses of the Renaissance and seems hardly to have belonged to the early nineteenth century. He was vitally interested in nearly everything, but almost nothing was closer to his heart than the education of all the peoples among whom he lived. He would have preferred, I suppose, that they be reared Roman Catholics, but he was too wise a person to hope that his sort of millenium was that close. Consequently he urged general education and even established his own schools and classes when there was nothing else to be done. He believed, too, that an active press in his town was necessary for the promotion of education -- after all, what was the use of reading if there was nothing local to read. After the destruction of Detroit in 1805 there was a period of general poverty and Father Richard was unable to raise -- from his own parishioners -- enough money to rebuild Ste. Anne's church. He went east in 1808, therefore, on a funds-raising expedition and when he returned he brought with

him a printing press and full equipment for its operation. Where he bought it we do not know. He put James M. Miller to work on the press and in 1809 Miller issued a schoolbook, a newspaper, and a religious work. The schoolbook -- probably composed by Father Richard -- was The Child's Spelling Book; or Michigan Instructor. The newspaper was The Michigan Essay, of which but the first issue is known. It is a four-page, four-column sheet, in which by far the most interesting part is the lists of books offered for sale by Miller, the editor-publisher-printer. Among the English books are the "Columbian Orator," "Chambeau's French Grammar," "Wakefield's family tour through the British Empire," the "Book of Trades embellished with 66 engravings," "Foot Steps to the Natural History of Beasts," the "Father's Gift," and "Letters from London." In a special list of religious books are entered "Advantages of Frequent Communion," "Garden of the Soul," "Pious Guide," "A Papist misrepresented and Represented," and others, including "Geographical Cards" which snuck in among the religious books, I am certain, quite by accident. The bilingual character of the inhabitants of Detroit -- and especially of the guiding light of the Detroit Printing Office, as the establishment was called, is indicated by the half-column advertisement for French books to be had or to be published. Among these were alphabets (in French or in English -- you could take your choice), catechisms, Christian doctrines, novenas, regulations, the New Testament, etc., etc. There is even a taste of humour in the newspaper. "Count Tracey complaining to Foote, that a man had ruined his character, 'So much the better,' replied the wit, 'for it was a d--d bad one and the sooner it was destroyed the more to your advantage.'"

Whether or not the newspaper wormed its way beyond the first number or was sunk before it started by such ill-starred humour is not known. I doubt if the printer cared too much, for he was busy enough printing broadsides, forms, etc., etc., and he left Detroit in 1810. Miller was followed as Detroit's printer by Aaron Coxshaw, who ran off the first pieces printed in Detroit from copperplates. Most of Coxshaw's pieces were of a religious character and most of them were in French. He did issue one little literary work which is an astonishing gem -- Les Ornemens de la Memoire.

Coxshaw was followed at once by Theophilus Mettez, whom Miller had trained -- what happened to Coxshaw is unknown; Miller had returned east. Mettez printed a number of rather important pieces -- mostly broadsides and broadsheets -- for he was at work during the years of the War of 1812 and was thus printing under both American and English rules. He probably printed General Hull's broadside appeal to the French Canadians and he probably printed the terms of Hull's capitulation. The first piece on which his name appears is the French version of a statement issued by the British dated August 21, 1812, assuring the inhabitants of Detroit that their kind British masters would let them go on living in the manner to which they had accustomed themselves. Mettez also printed a goodly number of books and pamphlets of both religious and secular characters until he retired from the printing business -- to become a farmer-binder, by the way -- about 1816. It was near this time that Father Richard ceased to participate in the publishing and printing of books, and well he might, for he had added to his many other duties six professorships

in the "Catholepistemiad or University of Michigania," which later became the University of Michigan.

In 1817, the first important newspaper in Michigan was established by John P. Sheldon and Ebenezer Reed under the inspiring title the Detroit Gazette. It appeared first on July 25, 1817, and ran until the early part of 1830, but the whole period was not passed through without competition. In 1825, Chipman & Seymour founded their Michigan Herald; a Detroit Telegram may have been put out in 1829; and the North-Western Journal and the Detroit Journal and Western Advertiser were running in 1829 and 1830 respectively. But the tribe of printers increased rapidly after 1825 in Detroit, though only a few deserve especial mention in this brief summary. Sheldon and Reed had been publishing books and pamphlets, as well as their newspaper, before 1825 and separately or together they continued in business. Chipman & Seymour broke in on them in 1825, as I said before, and they were followed soon by the firm of Sheldon & Wells, by Henry L. Ball, by Sheldon McKnight, and by others.

George L. Whitney is one of the Detroit printers of the period who must be mentioned if only because of his long and intimate contact with Henry R. Schoolcraft, the "algic" man. Whitney printed all of the works by Schoolcraft known to have been printed in Michigan. They were six in number and include the excessively rare Iosco, or the Vale of Norma, printed in Detroit in 1838. The work was limited to fifty copies of a private edition. It contains such touching lines as

"Oh time! too slow to come -- too quick to last,
Forever future, and forever past,
And still forever present; -- first to bring
The herald note that hails the plaudit king,
And first to sound the salutary call,
That bids the transitory monarch fall."

No wonder it was printed for private circulation.

But before Iosco found its way into print -- thirteen years before, in 1825, to be exact -- there was a printer at work outside of Detroit. He was Edward D. Ellis and he was working his inky way along through life at Monroe, where he established the Michigan Sentinel. He ran the weekly paper with success and some distinction for about ten years until he sold out to his rivals, the Mortons, the second Monroe printers. Ellis was heavily involved in politics and there is something rather delitfully bold about his printing at Monroe the Journals of the Legislature (which met in Detroit, of course) in 1826, 1827, 1829, and 1830. How he snared the lucrative contract from the hometown boys of Detroit has not been revealed as yet. The printing of legislative reports, documents, etc., was a plum of the first prize in pioneer days and there was many a frontier printing house which managed to keep nose above water only because of contracts with legislatures.

The third town in Michigan to receive printing into its bosom was Ann Arbor, and our first viper was Thomas Simpson who founded the Western Emigrant here in 1829. An indeterminate number of pieces -- ephemeral, I regret to say -- came from Simpson's press and that of his successors. It was not until 1834 that the Journal of the First

Annual Convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church of the Diocese of Michigan was issued as the first substantial piece from the "Office of the Emigrant." Simpson had slithered out of Ann Arbor the year after he opened his shop and four years before this latter piece was printed. But I shall leave our local printing history to the expert ministrations of Mr. Wiltse.*

Our own Thomas Simpson left Ann Arbor, as I said, in 1830 and moved on to Pontiac, where he founded and published for one year the Oakland Chronicle. He also printed the Acts of the Michigan legislature there in the same year, probably not under contract from the government, however. Five years later -- from the press of an unnamed printer -- came Robert MacCracken's Original Miscellaneous Poems, of which there was a second edition also at Pontiac two years later.

The fifth Michigan town to boast of a printing press was White Pigeon, where the Michigan Statesman and St. Joseph Chronicle disported itself from 1833 on. Niles followed the trend toward printing in 1835 when a newspaper was founded in that year and a single sermon was printed the following year. It took nine years for Niles to recover, and it was not until 1845 that another respectable book came from its press.

The spread of printing now became more rapid in Michigan. Adrian and St. Clair had seen printing in 1834, Niles, Mt. Clemens, and Kalamazoo in 1835, Centreville, Constantine, St. Joseph, Port Huron, Marshall, and Saginaw all in 1836. Two years later Ypsilanti burst forth with a newspaper, but not until nine years after it -- in 1847 -- did Charles Woodruff print a book, the Minutes of the Twelfth Anniversary of the Washtenaw Baptist Association.

I have said relatively little about the contents of Michigan books -- and for a very good reason. Most of them are -- to my mind -- distressingly dull. Mr. Uhlendorf had the courage once to make a careful study of early Michigan books and he describes their contents as follows:

> If it is true that the number of imprints issued at one place is an indication of the cultural alertness of the community, it is probably equally true that the types of material printed reflect in a large measure the interests of a region. Michigan as a state was only 14 years old at the end of the period covered...The political history was by no means a smooth one even before its admission as a state, and for two years there existed a state government with all its functions despite the fact that the State had not yet been admitted into the Union. The proceedings of the several constitutional conventions and the conventions of assent, as well as the reports of the various committees, contribute many items toward the total of 297 official documents listed in the Preliminary Check List of

*Copies of the paper on "Development of Printing in Washtenaw County," read by Mr. Arthur J. Wiltse at this same meeting, will be distributed to our membership at a later date. -Ed.

Michigan Imprints,...Moreover, had the documents and reports, usually published as house documents, senate documents, or joint documents, which are paged separately and were frequently extracted from the volumes, been treated as separate imprints, the number would have been much greater still. Beside the government documents there are many items which reflect even more the average person's interest in politics, namely all sorts of broadsides, summoning the voters to meetings and giving one side or another, or both, in political controversies.

Again, judging only from the printed items listed... religion must have held much of the Michigan pioneer's interest. There are 139 items, chiefly minutes of State and regional church bodies, of which the Baptists alone have 91 to their credit, while the Protestant Episcopal Church is next with 18 entries.

The important part religion seems to have played in the life of the Michigan pioneer -- and by 1850 Michigan was still culturally and economically a pioneer state -- is further reflected in the number of temperance publications. Of the 12 recorded..., 5 are temperance lectures, mostly by clergymen, and 7 records of temperance societies.

Among societies other than church and temperance, the Masonic organization is represented by the greatest number of proceedings. And in addition to the 16 lodge records there are 5 Masonic lectures.

The publications most characteristic of Michigan's ethnic make-up in the early years is the great number of publications in the French language. Beside the 15 items of a devotional nature printed in the French language only and several bilingual pieces of a similar nature, there are 8 legislative documents and governors' message, 12 memorials and proclamations, and 6 readers.

Perhaps equally important ethnologically are the number of volumes in various Indian dialects. There are one Indian language grammar and ten readers, which are attributable in part to the labors of Catholic missionaries among the Indians. Bishop Frederic Baraga, of the Hapsburg dynasty, is the author of five Indian language readers alone.

It must be admitted that there are but few authors whose works are printed in Michigan who have attained national recognition. The only one, perhaps, is Henry R. Schoolcraft, who is represented with eight titles.

The Michigan Historical Collections, which as most of you know is buried in the basement of the Rackham Building, owns a respectable number of early Michigan imprints; the General Library, the Law Library, the Transportation Library, and the Clements Library also hold copies of various items. The Michigan Historical Collections has disinterred some of its more interesting specimens -- including the original manuscript account books of an Albion printer, Mr. Thornton -- and put them on display. I would advise you to visit the Collections (hours: week-days 8:30 to 12:00, Mon. through Fri., 1:30 to 4:30). There you will see such interesting and unusual pieces as the "Washington's Birth Night Mechanic's Ball" held in Ann Arbor in 1837. The printer of this is, unfortunately, unknown, but that makes it none the less interesting. The rare broadside of sale of Ann Arbor lands in 1837 is also on display, as are several of the earlier catalogues of the University and of the Michigan Central College and especially the University's Junior class exhibitions. One of the University catalogues -- represented in the exhibition by two copies -- has a most uncommon border design on the front wrapper. Particularly interesting, too, is the pair of copies of the catalogue of the University Library. The Historical Collections is fortunate in owning eight unique copies of early Michigan imprints. I do hope that all of you will visit the exhibition soon.

Ann Arbor, Michigan
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